Visitor Tracking

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

Towards the end of December, I read an article in USA Today about the growing trend of consumers taking online privacy into their own hands. I resonated with the article; like many, it bothers me that websites like Facebook track virtually everywhere I go, and that ads pop up wherever I am that reflect my interests from other sites I've visited. Sure, to some extent, this is good – the ads I see are more relevant to my interests. But it's spooky too. It feels like I'm constantly being spied on.

So, I checked out some of the latest tools in blocking the spying that "evil corporations" are doing on the web. I installed *Do Not Track Plus* as a Firefox extension. It's pretty cool. In the top right of my Firefox window is a little green bubble telling me how many spying sites *Do Not Track Plus* is blocking on the current page. Clicking on the bubble tells me the details. For example, on the page for that *USA Today* article the circle says *Do Not Track Plus* is blocking 9 sites: Facebook, three ad networks, and five other tracking companies (Comscore Beacon, Omniture, AddThis, Gigya, and Quantcast). Wow!

I felt really good about myself. I'm protecting my privacy!

Then I went to my site, knowing that the green bubble would say zero. I was shocked that it didn't. It had a 2 staring out at me. What? That can't be! I'm not an "evil corporation;" I'm a ministry with pure motives. Clicking on the bubble told me that I was using two tracking companies: StatCounter and Google Analytics. Well, I guess I knew that, but I hadn't thought of those as "evil spying tools" – they simply help me in understanding who is visiting and how they're using the site.

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus told his apostles "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (ESV) That verse certainly seems

to apply to our ministry websites. As online ministries, it often feels that we are the sheep amongst the wolves, and while visitor tracking tools help us be as wise as serpents, they can also make us appear to be anything but innocent doves.

What is Visitor Tracking and how can Christian Ministries benefit from it?

I'm guessing the readers of Christian Computing are well aware of visitor tracking and the benefits. Visitor tracking tools tell me whether my site is attracting local visitors or those from around the world. They tell me how visitors found me (search engines or links on other sites). Using this information, I can determine whether I need to work on "promoting" my site differently or better – maybe focusing more on search engine optimization or getting added to online church directories.

Visitor tracking tools tell me how long visitors stay on my site. They tell me which pages visitors come in through and the last page they visit before leaving. They tell me which pages are most popular and which aren't getting any visits at all. I can even see how visitors move through my site. Using this information, I can work on the content on my site – making it more compelling. I can also work on site navigation so visitors can find the information that's most important given the mission of my site.

Visitor tracking tools also tell me how visitors are visiting my site. What browsers are they using? What types of devices? What resolution is their display? Using this information, I can work on site design. If almost all of my visitors are on high resolution displays I can better use screen real estate. If a growing number are on mobile devices, maybe it's time to figure out how to provide a mobile version of my site.

Obviously, this information is incredibly valuable as we seek to serve God and our neighbors through our online ministries.
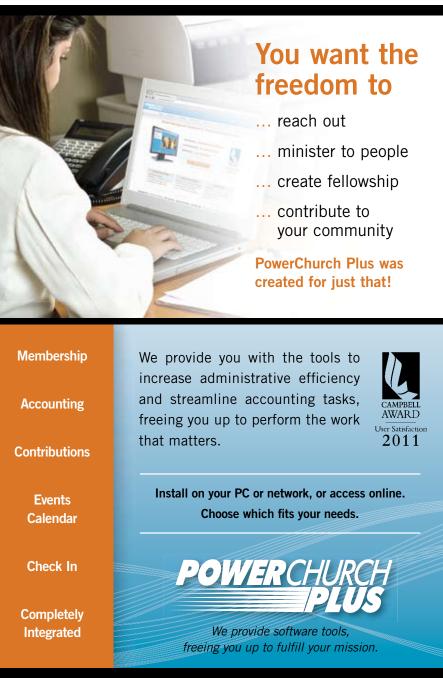
So, what's the problem?

In both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul tells us that church leaders must be "above reproach." Commentator Matthew Henry says of this phrase "he must give as little occasion for blame as can be, because this would be a prejudice to his ministry and would reflect reproach upon his office." That number 2 in the green bubble doesn't strike me as being "above reproach." We need to consider whether using visitor tracking tools will reflect poorly on our ministry.

On a more practical level, *Do Not Track Plus* claims to be blocking my visitor tracking tools from registering my visit to my own site. If tools like this continue to grow in popularity, Google Analytics and other similar visitor tracking tools may start to lose their usefulness to our ministries.

What am I going to do? Of course, I'll continue to seek the Lord's will for my ministry in all things, including visitor tracking. For now, I'm considering implementing software on my server to track the basic visitor stats. A quick Google search shows some open source alternatives that I'll investigate. My hope is that, since the data will be on my server and not sent to a third party, it won't be marked as "spying" and my green bubble will go to zero.

The one open source alternative that looks most promising at this point is Piwick. The Piwick website describes the software this way: "Piwik aims to be an open source alternative to Google Analytics, and is already used on more than 200,000 websites. Piwik is a PHP MySQL software program that you download and install on your own webserver. At the end of the five minute installation process you will be given a

JavaScript code. Simply copy and paste this tag on websites you wish to track (or use an existing plug-in to do it automatically for you) and access your analytics reports in real time. …because Piwik is installed on your server, the data is stored in your own database and you can get all the statistics using the powerful Piwik Analytics API." If anyone has experience with Piwick or would recommend a different approach, I would welcome hearing from you at russ.mcguire@gmail.com .

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encour-

age you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, social networks, smartphones, streaming video services, or visitor tracking tools, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler. net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six home-schooled students under Russ' direction.